

Ageism and Wealth-ism Are Alive and Well in Ashland

The Ashland Parks and Recreation budget provides a clear understanding of the APR's priorities based on where tax dollars are to be spent for parks and other community services. Parks Director Michael Black and the elected Parks Commissioners ad hoc committee have stated they are looking for ways to increase the financial contribution to the budget of the Senior Center.

Looking more closely at the APRC's \$18 million-dollar budget for 2017-2019, under the section, "Direct Services to Citizens," are four programs that APR supports: North Mountain Park, the Daniel Meyer Pool, the Ashland Rotary Ice Rink, and the Senior Center. Budgets for these services are apparently under \$250,000 each, as no revenue/expenditure detail is provided in the budget.

What is presented in the budget are two divisions that provide services to the citizens of Ashland, the Recreational Division and the Golf Division. For these, both revenue and expenditure line items are shown:

Division	Expenses	% of Total Budget	Revenues	
<u>Shortfall</u>				
Recreation Div.	\$3,190,000	17%	\$874,000	\$2,316,000
Golf Div.	\$1,163,000	7%	\$609,000	\$
<u>554,000</u>				
Total	\$4,353,000	24%	\$1,483,000	\$2,873,000

The Senior Center, with a budget of under \$250,000, represents less than 1.38% of the total \$18 million-dollar budget, and so the obvious question is why did Director Black and the commissioners zero in on the Senior Center, this already tiny slice of the APR pie, to extract savings, especially when the \$2,873,000 shortfall from the Recreation and Golf divisions offer far more opportunities for revenue recovery?

One answer may be ageism; another may be wealth-ism. If the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and if the elderly poor are the least likely to kick up a fuss, then the Senior Center might be the most politically expedient place to extract budget cuts.

The only Ashland city service that clearly focuses on our growing senior population is the Senior Center. Seniors engaged at the Center consider it like family, a place they find conversation, friendship, and meaning, as well as a nutritious meal. The most likely to participate at the Senior Center are the less wealthy; more affluent Ashland seniors can afford to travel to visit family and friends and can more easily pay to put healthy food on the table.

But many seniors in our community are facing increasingly dire financial insecurity. Social Security's annual cost-of-living increases have amounted to between zero and just one or two percent each year for the past several years, this at a time when medical expenses and the cost for supplemental health insurance premiums have skyrocketed. Many seniors can no longer afford to pay for medications and face the tragic choice of paying either for drugs or for food. At the same time, the rising cost of energy has resulted in huge increases in our local utility rates. And for those lucky enough to own their own homes, the City Council's increasing reliance on property tax increases to pay for budget shortfalls has made Ashland property taxes among the highest in the state. Seniors who retired a decade ago believing they would

be financially secure are awakening to the stark reality that they cannot survive on their Social Security and dwindling assets.

Clearly, a Center with events and services that provide such quality-of-life assistance is more than earning and paying its way; it is critically essential to many. None of the other APR programs can claim this. The APRC's decision to cut the Senior Center's budget and staffing demonstrates an appalling lack of understanding and empathy for the people it serves.

Requiring that the Recreational and Golf divisions break even would be seriously unpopular. Clientele of these divisions likely have more money and more influence with the Commissioners and Council. Commissioners and councilors don't attend Senior Center events to understand what a family of seniors is about or how staff draw volunteers to the Center for the care of our seniors.

To say the Senior Center needs to be brought into "Parks" is backwards; Parks staff and commissioners need to be brought into the "family" at the Senior Center to see what it means to belong to a truly inclusive community. I strongly urge that we find another facility for the APRC's dreamed-of, state-of-the-art, intergenerational recreational center. The Senior Center building is taken—by seniors who desperately need it and its services, and by the staff who know them best. If cost-cutting is needed, let the APR identify larger and less essential slices of the pie. Let the younger and more able to pay among our citizens bear the brunt of such cuts, rather than our most vulnerable.

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Ashland